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NEWSLETTER

A Newsletter by the Resident Coordinator's Office in Lesotho

Looking back- The UN's response to COVID-19 in 2020 and stories of hope

Foreword by the RC

Salvator Niyonzima

2020 UN Response in numbers

2020 marked 75 years since the UN Charter was ratified, on the 24th October 1945. Today, the United Nations faces a number of emergencies that we must support to develop the future we want and the future we need. The COVID-19 pandemic has turned from a health crisis to the most severe socio-economic crisis in almost 100 years. At the same time, the devastating effects of climate change are accelerating and must be quickly brought under control.

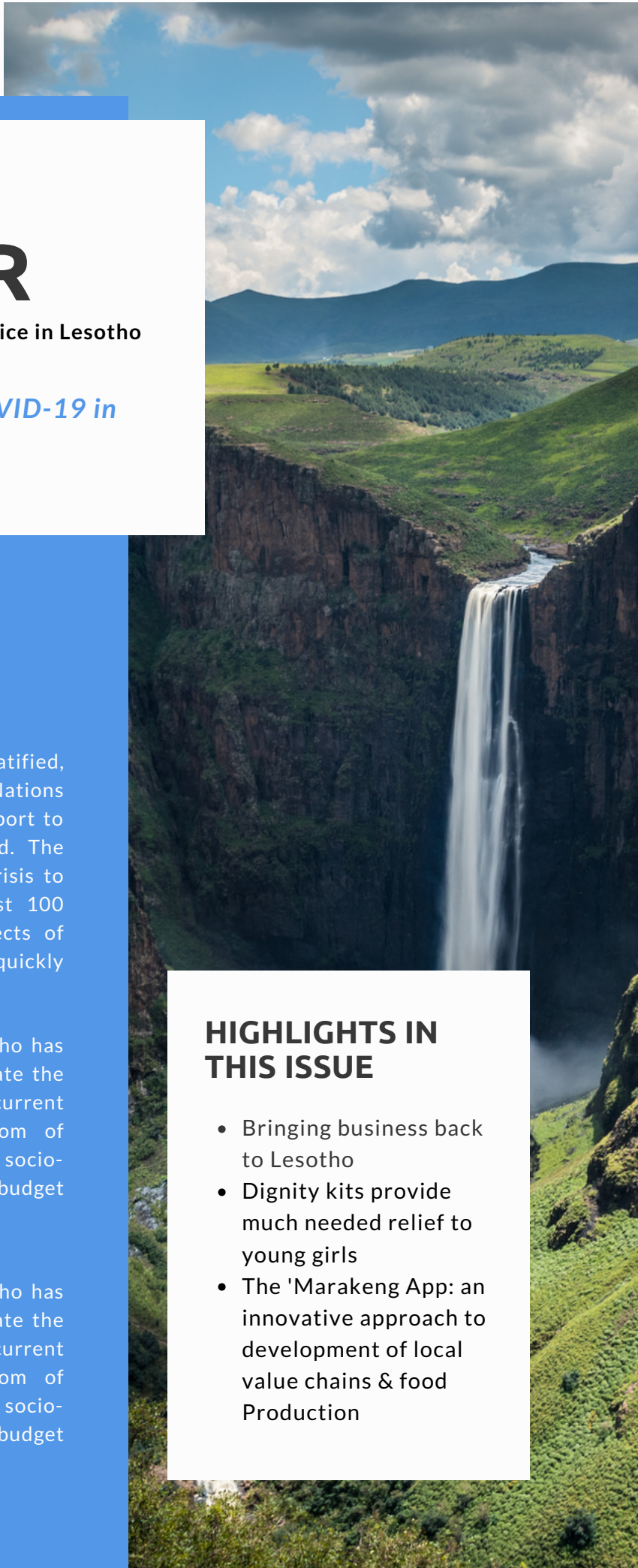
During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN in Lesotho has been committed to stay and deliver and to mitigate the threat to our guiding principles - the SDGs. Our current Socio-Economic Response Plan for the Kingdom of Lesotho outlines 18 new activities to combat the socio-economic fallout from the pandemic with a total budget of US\$68 million that we are currently fundraising for.

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- The 'Marakeng App: an innovative approach to development of local value chains & food Production



Whilst there is still lots to be done, our 2020 achievements demonstrate a very successful and comprehensive response to the pandemic. To name just a few, we have successfully supported the continuation of health services in all 193 health facilities in the country; we have provided support to over 17,000 community health workers to maintain essential services; we have increased access to water and sanitation for over 360,000 people; we have supported over 225,000 children with distance education solutions and have provided take home rations to over 270,000 children who were reliant on free school meals before the pandemic. We have conducted a number of assessments, including, but not limited to, assessments on employment and productivity, gender, migrant returnees and the 2020 Lesotho National Vulnerability Assessment; all of the aforementioned support informed policy making and thereby a comprehensive response to the pandemic.

At times, our urgent response to the COVID-19 pandemic may have diverted us away from our planned activities as guided by our Development Assistance Framework. This is to be expected as we shift our focus from development assistance to humanitarian assistance under an exceptional and unexpected situation. Looking forward we will need to assess how to balance the humanitarian and development response to ensure that the Kingdom of Lesotho does not renege in the accomplishment of the SDGs.

As I also conclude my assignment in Lesotho, the United Nations in Lesotho shall remain standing together with the Kingdom of Lesotho to Build Back Better, and to ensure that the Kingdom of Lesotho is not permanently scarred from the COVID-19 crisis. The United Nations will support the Government of Lesotho to create a Lesotho that is green, equal and fair; to support private sector development and job creation, but in a manner that does not contribute to climate change and provides fair working conditions to all; and to develop strong social safety systems to ensure that all Basotho have access to decent health and education and that nobody falls through the cracks.

It was a pleasure working in Lesotho with you all! Until we meet again, Salang Hantle!



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The Government of Lesotho joins forces with the UN to address malnutrition

In November 2020, after months of research and planning, the Government of Lesotho and the UN in Lesotho officially launched a Maximum Intervention Programme (MIP), supported by the global Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger (REACH) initiative. The programme facilitator, Maseqobela Williams, identified that COVID-19, and the associated movement restrictions, posed an adverse impact on food security and nutrition, particularly amongst rural communities in Lesotho.

By engaging the UN Network (UNN), Mme Maseqobela was able to identify what interventions already existed, and could be scaled up, and was able to obtain valuable data to identify the most vulnerable communities. Building on existing interventions and data, four districts were identified that had the highest rates of malnutrition and least interventions: Mokhotlong; Thaba-Tseka; Butha-Buthe; and Mohale's Hoek, and a multifaceted programme was established to diversify diets, empower communities to farm more productively, and increase awareness around COVID-19 and nutrition, including infant and young child feeding (IYCF).

2,000 households with young children in rural Lesotho will benefit from the MIP, and will receive food baskets that also contain 10 different vegetable seeds for long-term food security, a training manual in growing practices, and education materials regarding nutrition, infant and young child feeding, breastfeeding, and COVID-19. All of the education materials are easy to read, contain many infographics, and have been provided in both English and Sesotho. By providing a comprehensive response to nutrition in the most vulnerable communities, the programme will significantly contribute towards community resilience and food security.



Launch event of the Maximum Intervention Programme in Quthing District, Qomoqomong.



Supporting the Rehabilitation of Water Systems to Provide Water to Communities During Droughts and Emergency Situations

Rethabile Matsoso and her grandmother, residents of Matebeleng village in Quthing District, can now fetch water closer to their home...

Rethabile Matsoso is seven years old and lives with her grandmother. I meet them on their way to fetching water from a tap close to their home. Rethabile's grandmother carries a watering can while she, Rethabile, has a 5-liter water bucket in hand. "I see you are helping your grandmother fetch water?" I ask Rethabile. She giggles and hides behind her granny's blanket. "Yes!" the grandmother says. "We are relieved that we can fetch water so close to home. We used to fetch it over there, and it was a lot of work for me." She says, pointing into the distance. With climate change, Lesotho has become prone to recurrent droughts, experiencing three droughts in the past four years.

In response to the 2019/20 drought, the UN mobilized resources from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to support the pressing needs of the population. A second round of funding, worth US\$ 3,050,000, was awarded in 2020 and has to date benefitted 293,418 individuals: 54,952 men, 75,878 women, 66,625 boys and 95,963 girls, and 15% more people than planned; from 5 projects in health, WASH, nutrition, agriculture, food security and social protection.

Rethabile and her grandmother benefitted from a project to increase access to water and sanitation for all (SDG6), through rehabilitating water systems in the most drought affected communities. Working alongside the Ministry of Water's Department of Rural Water Supply, the UN has constructed water tanks and standpipes, installed new solar panelled pumps, and trained local water champions in 13 districts. "Don't be shy" Rethabile's grandmother says to her. "Tell the lady that now we have water that is available consistently, and that we don't have to walk a long distance to get it." "I am very happy" Rethabile responds with a shy smile and gives a little pose for the camera.



Rethabile and her mother fetch water from a nearby water source...



Bringing business back to Lesotho: How small local shops can be tools to fight hunger

Lekoane Busa has run Tsau-Tsau General Dealer, a small groceries retailer, since 1963. Profits from Tsau-Tsau have enabled him to send all eight of his children to school. In 2018, Busa was contacted by the UN and connected to 25 small grocery shops to form a partnership to achieve economies of scale. By partnering with other small retailers, Busa and his group were able to buy products for their stores in bulk, at a lesser price, and to share the transport cost of moving their purchased goods to their stores. As a larger group of retailers, Busa also had more negotiating power with his suppliers.

Once the partnership was successfully running, the UN was then able to procure food items from Busa and his group for food distribution programmes to vulnerable populations, thereby benefitting two vulnerable communities. Since 2018, Busa's network have provided food items to over 160,000 beneficiaries. Busa recalls "they told me they have an operation to feed vulnerable children and that they wanted to partner with local retailers. As a farmer, it had always been my wish to give back once I became successful. This was the first time I could achieve that dream."

Busa's work with the UN may have encouraged a philanthropic outlook. Despite his own business struggles during COVID-19, he recognises that others in his community are also struggling. "Business has not been the same since the pandemic began. Many of our customers have lost their jobs so they are spending less, and as a result, we are making less too." In response to the pandemic, and due to the income security provided from partnering with the UN and other local retailers, Busa has been able to give back to his community during the pandemic. He and 13 retailers from the buying club have prepared and distributed food parcels to 26 families in their villages impacted most by the declining economic conditions. The parcels included maize, flour, sugar, and soap and cleaning detergents to help curb the spread of COVID-19.



Lekoane Busa, a local grocery retailer in Pontseng, Quthing district, Lesotho, faced business challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Fighting food insecurity: FAO seed distributions

The Kingdom of Lesotho faces chronic food insecurity, driven by recurrent droughts and land degradation. Further, the agricultural sector in Lesotho is dominated by subsistence farmers. Drought and land degradation reduces the capacity of subsistence farmers to produce sufficient food for their own needs and reduces the availability of food for those that normally buy from subsistence farmers, particularly in rural areas. COVID-19 has exacerbated food insecurity in Lesotho as movement restrictions limit farmers access to both inputs and to markets. As a result, 582,000 Basotho, or 40% of the population, are expected to face acute food insecurity between October 2020 and March 2021.

Mr. Teboho Tsiu is a 45-year-old farmer who lives with his wife and three children in Mphaki, a small rural town in the mountains of Quthing. Mphaki provides a market place for the surrounding villages, where many people rely on crop farming for food and wool and mohair farming for income. During the first COVID-19 lockdown, movement restrictions prevented villagers from accessing Mphaki market and thereby reduced their ability to purchase food. “There was not have enough food for the family” Teboho recalls.

In response, a ‘Special Programme for Food Security in Response to the Impacts of COVID 19 in Lesotho’ was established by the UN. Under the programme, 19,000 households will receive 10kg of maize seeds, 10 kg of beans seeds and 50kg of fertilizers, worth US\$ 56, which will support households’ food production against continuous movement restrictions. “I am satisfied to be receiving these bean seeds, I will start planting tomorrow. This has helped a lot because a 10 kg bag of beans seeds at the store is M250 and I could not afford it”, Teboho said happily upon receiving the first part of his package.



Tsiu receives his seed inputs from the distribution centre in Mphaki.



Dignity Kits Provide Much Needed Relief to Young Girls

When 14-year old Thembekile* started menstruating, her aunt taught her how to use an old cloth to avoid embarrassing leakages. Thembekile is one of many girls in Quthing district that must rely on old cloths as their families are too poor to afford sanitary pads. COVID-19 has destroyed family incomes as many Basotho have lost their jobs.

Female sanitary health as also suffered as families prioritise food with their limited income over female hygiene products. Thembekile's aunt explains "we have nothing. Nothing. When we wake up we don't know where to go and what to do. My greatest challenge is that I don't only look after Thembekile, but I have my own children who have not done well in matric examinations and are idling at home. COVID-19 has made things worse."

The UN has partnered with Lesotho Red Cross Society (LRCS) to support 2,500 girls like Thembekile by distributing dignity kits and sensitising vulnerable adolescent women and young girls on sexual and reproductive health and rights in Quthing, Mokhotlong, Maseru, Mafeteng and Mohale's Hoek districts. When Thembekile's aunt received a dignity kit for Thembekile, she also had the opportunity to talk to an official from the Child and Gender Protection Unit (CGPU).

At the same time, Woman Police Constable, Mme Lirontso Shale, spoke to Thembekile and her friends on their human rights. "It is difficult for some of us to talk to our children about issues relating to sex, child marriage and other children's rights. So, we are happy that the girls were advised on these issues today." Thembekile's aunt recalled. *Not real name.



Handing over of dignity kits by the Lesotho Red Cross Society in Mafeteng District.



The Marakeng app: an innovative approach to development of local value chains and food production

COVID-19 has exacerbated the Kingdom of Lesotho's longstanding problems of weak agricultural production and value chains, particularly amongst smallholder farmers, food insecurity and youth unemployment. The Lesotho Accelerator Lab is a collaboration between the UN and the National University of Lesotho to address youth unemployment through encouraging entrepreneurs to share their ideas and nurturing them into successful business models. Occasionally, business models arise that promise to combat a myriad of challenges faced by the Kingdom.

The Marakeng e-market platform, developed in early 2020 and launched towards the end of 2020 following incubation by the Lesotho Accelerator Lab, promises to develop local value chains and food production, even during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated movement restrictions. The Marakeng e-market platform connects farmers, street vendors, retailers and customers and facilitates online sales and delivery.

By enhancing agricultural value chains, food supply is improved: food no longer perishes with the farmer, farmers are regularly paid for their produce, which supports their livelihoods, and a constant flow of produce is delivered to customers. Meanwhile, customers also benefit from a regular supply of fresh and varied produce, which supports their nutrition, and a reduced risk of rising food prices.

One farmer reports that: "I have benefitted immensely from the app. I saw an advert on Facebook calling on tomato suppliers and I contacted the support line. I had to deliver my first order to a supermarket the following day, on my way from delivering that order, I was contacted to test the market in one of the nearby village shops and I did. To my surprise, four days later I got another order through the App, and I have to admit, it exceeded my expectations especially since I was not required to pay anything, and the registration process was just too easy."



The Marakeng poster for farmers to register and download the app.



Humanitarian Response to Vulnerable returnees/ households in Migration Affected Areas in Lesotho

It is estimated that in 2019 there were 342,000 Basotho working overseas, the majority of whom work in South Africa and in low-paid unskilled jobs. Many Basotho migrants lost their jobs when COVID-19 caused farms and factories to close, and when international borders closed they were either left stranded in South Africa or had to illegally cross the border back to Lesotho. Approximately 100,000 Basotho returned to Lesotho when South Africa first went in to lockdown.

Many returnees have fallen into poverty due to loss of employment and in some cases, loss of a community or family support system. Where the returnee used to look after their entire family, whole families have fallen into poverty. To support vulnerable returning migrants, and to ensure that their vulnerability is temporary and they can return to work, the UN has established a two-tier approach. Vulnerable migrants and families were included into social protection programmes for the first time, and over 2,000 migrant households were provided with food parcels to meet their urgent needs.

To support migrants long-term prosperity, three vocational training centres have been established in Mochale's Hoek, Quthing and Qacha's Nek and the UN has worked alongside the District Covid-19 Secretariat (DISCOSEC) and auxiliary social workers to identify migrants that would benefit from skills development. 230 migrants have been identified as willing and committed to undertake a course and willing and able to live in the vocational centre during the course duration, where they will be provided with accommodation, meals, PPE and all course materials. As of the 11th January 2021, 180 migrant returnees have started a course.



UN and Mochale's Hoek district team discuss selection of beneficiaries.



Risk Communication and Community Engagement: When youths lead the way to fight COVID-19

About two hundred and forty kilometers south of the capital city of Lesotho, Maseru, lies Mohale's Hoek district. At the foothills of a range of mountains and hills is a community called Phamong. The Phamong community comprises several small to medium size villages. One of the small villages in the area is Ha Makhofola. This village has a scanty population of a few hundreds of people scattered over various hills in the area.

Sparsely populated as Ha Makhofola village is, it has been proven here that risk communication and community engagement are the best strategies to enhance community efforts in fighting the deadly COVID-19 disease. Youths in the area were mobilized and engaged on an agenda that aimed to sensitize and engage the community members about COVID-19. Through the technical and financial support from the UN, the Mohale'Hoek District Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Pillar worked with Ha Makhofola community leadership in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the community members from the village, Mr Moorosi Makhofola, took upon himself to organize the youths and thoroughly trained them on public health preventive measures for COVID-19.

This was done by ensuring that all community adheres to measures, including the wearing of masks, regular washing of hands with clean running water and soap and keeping a recommended physical distance of at least one meter between people. The Ha Makhofola youths responded by ensuring that everyone within their village adhered to the recommended preventive measures. This was done by educating their fellow community members and ensuring that they also put into practice what they learned. The youths were an enthusiastic group and ensured among others that every household in their village had hand washing facilities in various forms such as buckets, old plastic containers serving as water containers, including tippy taps. During funerals, handwashing facilities were availed by the youths.

Further, to ensure infection prevention and control measures were in place, the youths asked community members to observe a minimum of a meter distance between themselves. As a way to show discipline in their operations, the youths demonstrated support to the community by standing in pairs at all entry points into the village clusters. This is done to make sure that everyone entering the village wears a face mask and that they wash their hands with soap and running water before entering the village. During public gatherings, the youths are seen dotted all over such gatherings and ensure all people at such gatherings observe physical distance of a minimum one meter. Through their local leadership the youths share various infection prevention and control messages through brief talks at funerals.

Soccer is a popular sport in Lesotho, especially cherished in the rural villages, usually played on weekends. The youth from Ha Makhofola also use such public events as an opportunity to educate the community about COVID-19. Prior to the match, they educate not only the players but also the spectators and ensure that throughout the match, spectators are adhering to physical distancing. It is from communities like these that we can learn to take part in spreading the message and curb the spread of COVID-19 in the country.



Ensuring access to quality SRHR/HIV/GBV services by LGBTIQ+ people during COVID-19

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people are acutely vulnerable to discrimination, exclusion, violence, and abuse because mainstream society considers them to be culturally deviant. As COVID-19 stretches health systems, there will be greater competition for resources and the LGBTIQ+ community risk facing even greater discrimination. The risk is particularly high for the LGBTIQ+ community living with HIV/AIDS as resources have been diverted from community based HIV interventions and competition will be particularly high.

In an effort to mitigate the likely negative impact of COVID-19 on LGBTIQ+ people in Lesotho, the UN partnered with The People's Matrix, a local LGBTIQ+ organization, to ensure continuity of access to SRHR/HIV/GBV services for the LGBTIQ+ community they serve and to disseminate accurate information on COVID-19, dispelling myths and misconceptions. The project also adopted online platforms and radio to facilitate an open dialogue on LGBTIQ+ discrimination and to further sensitise the LGBTIQ+ community. According to the Executive Director of the People's Matrix, Mothopeng Tampose, "unlike other projects we have implemented that focused mainly on MSM/TGs [men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women (TG)], this project ensured inclusivity and consequently many LGBTIQ+ people were able to access SRHR/HIV/GBV services.

The project has brought to our attention that there are more LGBTIQ+ people that need support than we knew, and we feel it [the project] must be sustained and expanded. It has enabled us to reach even those who are hard to reach". The project initially targeted 400 members of the LGBTIQ+ community in and around Maseru, but reached 2,400 individuals. Of these, 1210 were referred for SRHR/HIV/GBV services. Although the project primarily targeted Maseru, the use of online platforms and radio allowed for much greater awareness of the challenges the LGBTIQ+ community face and reassurance and information for the LGBTIQ+ community.

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Protect yourself and others from COVID-19

HOW TO WEAR A MEDICAL MASK SAFELY

DO's →



- Wash your hands before touching the mask
- Inspect the mask for tears or holes
- Find the top side, where the metal piece or stiff edge is
- Ensure the colored-side faces outwards
- Place the metal piece or stiff edge over your nose
- Cover your mouth, nose, and chin
- Adjust the mask to your face without leaving gaps on the sides
- Avoid touching the mask
- Remove the mask from behind the ears or head
- Keep the mask away from you and surfaces while removing it
- Discard the mask immediately after use preferably into a closed bin
- Wash your hands after discarding the mask

Remember that masks alone cannot protect you from COVID-19. Maintain at least 1 metre distance from others and wash your hands frequently and thoroughly, even while wearing a mask.

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HOW TO WEAR A MEDICAL MASK SAFELY

Don'ts →



- Do not use a ripped or damp mask
- Do not wear the mask only over mouth or nose
- Do not wear a loose mask
- Do not touch the front of the mask
- Do not remove the mask to talk to someone or do other things that would require touching the mask
- Do not leave your used mask within the reach of others
- Do not re-use the mask

Remember that masks alone cannot protect you from COVID-19. Maintain at least 1 metre distance from others and wash your hands frequently and thoroughly, even while wearing a mask.

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